

As a member, you're probably very familiar with Kew's beautiful landscape, but there are always fresh experiences to be had. Mindfulness coach Karen Liebenguth suggests a simple way to enjoy and benefit from your future walks in the Gardens

POSITIVE STEPS

We can all get a bit overwhelmed by life sometimes. But spending time outdoors, in gardens and nature, can help us slow down and make the most of being in the present moment. Opportunities to reflect and recharge are crucial for our well-being, keeping stress and anxiety in check. Taking a walk in a natural setting like Kew can help to restore and refresh us. If you can walk 'mindfully', you'll be amazed how much more such a walk will offer you. But how is a 'mindful walk' different from a normal walk? And what is 'mindfulness' anyway?

Many of us spend a lot of our time on autopilot, lost in our thoughts. Even when we come to a place as beautiful

Try out mindfulness as you take a walk at Kew – it should help to calm your thoughts and bring you into the present moment



Photo: lolostock/Alamy

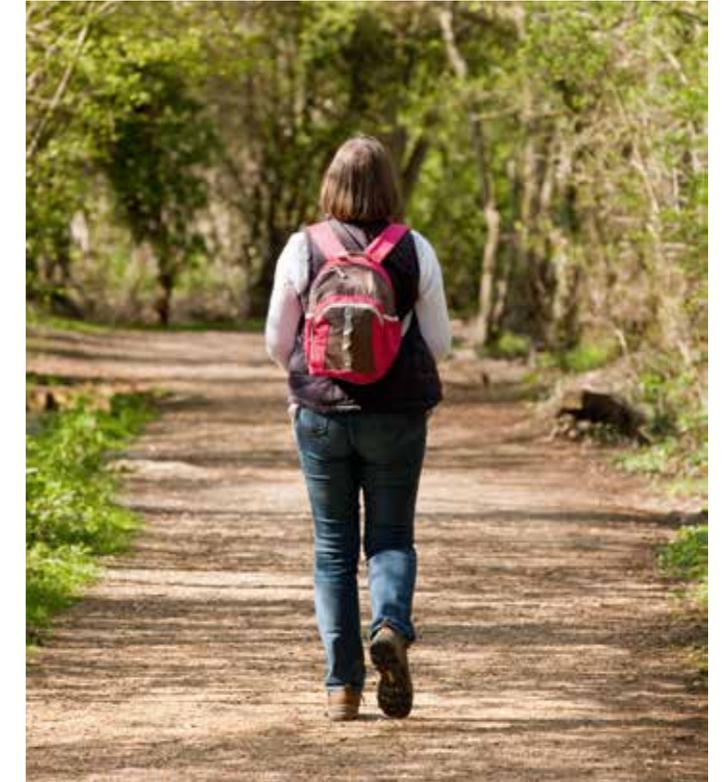
Notice the details of a particular flower – its size, shape and colours, and the way it moves in any breeze



Right: increase your awareness by focusing on different senses – use touch, smell and hearing as well as sight



Below: make each step slow, gentle and deliberate, and try to keep your mind in the present moment



Slow down your pace, become aware of your feet on the earth...

as Kew, we're thinking about the past or fretting about the future. We are constantly analysing, comparing, judging, worrying and problem-solving, rather than paying attention to our experience in the present moment. As a result, we can feel stressed or overwhelmed by life. Mindfulness is when we pay attention to what we experience in the moment – our immediate surroundings, thoughts, feelings and sensations. This can help to ground us in the here and now and give us a fresh view of the situation in front of us.

Mindfulness can help us notice and move away from unhelpful, habitual thoughts and reactions to everyday events. It can enable us to be more open to, and gain greater control of, how we respond to experiences – both the pleasurable and the more stressful.

It's often easier to be mindful when we're outdoors. We naturally slow down and our senses heighten as we connect with what's around us. As we walk, our unconscious mind streamlines its thoughts, reflects and generates new ways of thinking, often coming up with fresh ideas and solutions.

So how do you walk 'mindfully'? Well, next time you come to Kew, give the following a try. Then see how much more you notice and enjoy your walk, and how you feel afterwards.

First, slow down your pace and become aware of your feet on the earth, the sky above you and the fresh air on your face. Then turn your attention to your surroundings. Rest your gaze on a flower. Notice its colour, shape and the size of the petals. Does it have a scent? Absorb its beauty for at least ten seconds. There's no rush – after all, it takes a lot longer

Photo: RBG Kew, iolostock/Alamy, Kumar Sriskandan/Alamy

for a pleasant experience to become rooted in the mind than a negative one.

Then continue your walk. Notice something else that attracts your attention and take it in. Use your different senses. Explore the bark of a tree, the texture of some leaves. Listen to the sounds that surround you – birds, people, insects or even the planes.

As you continue walking mindfully, you may want to broaden your awareness to take in your surroundings as a whole, or the atmosphere of a particular spot in the Gardens or glasshouses. Notice the people you pass. Become aware of how you feel and the effect that being mindful has on you. What else are you aware of?

Taking mindful walks in the Gardens regularly is an investment in yourself. By becoming more aware, you'll enrich your day-to-day experience and improve how you feel about

yourself, others and your surroundings. But mindfulness is no quick fix. It's a practice that unfolds and deepens over time.

I led a six-session mindfulness course in the Gardens last autumn, and received lots of positive feedback. One participant, Shirley, explains how she benefited: 'I'd been going through a stressful period, having difficulty coping with life. Karen's positive guidance and careful explanation of the practice of mindfulness helped me to change my way of thinking, for which she has my gratitude.'

Spring is in the air right now and Kew is a treasure trove of beauty and delight, full of freshness and life. It's the ideal time to enjoy a mindful walk and get the most out of every moment.

Want to know more about mindfulness? Karen will be running another six-week mindfulness course at Kew this autumn – 10 September–15 October, Tuesdays, 2–4.30pm. Call 020 8332 5641 for more details and to book your place. Or visit Karen's website at [greenspacecoaching.com](https://www.greenspacecoaching.com) for more information.

You can also join a guided mindful walk and try forest bathing in the beautiful surroundings of Wakehurst this spring – for details, see p71.